

Why Schools Don't Educate

As teacher John Gatto pleads, the inherent problems with 'schooling' could be solved with methods that help children develop self-knowledge and self-reliance, and which encourage family involvement.

When John Taylor Gatto was named New York City's Teacher of the Year (for the second year in a row) in 1990, his acceptance speech was not a quiet thank-you, but a loud-and-clear challenge to the conventional wisdom surrounding the role of education, family, individual and community today. Not just about New York City schools and children, his remarks address concerns that educators and parents feel, more or less deeply, no matter where they reside. The challenges we face in the education and engagement of our children are serious and complex, and they are not simply the responsibility of our schools. Yet schools can provide much of the context necessary for making our society and our world the kind of place in which we all want to live. So we take pleasure in publishing the impassioned remarks of one of the most vocal and articulate champions of educational reform.

— Jon Wilson, Editor & Publisher, HOPE magazine

I accept this award on behalf of all the fine teachers I've known over the years who've struggled to make their transactions with children honourable ones: men and women who are never complacent, always questioning, always wrestling to define and re-define endlessly what the word "education" should mean. A "Teacher of the Year" is not the best teacher around—those people are too quiet to be easily uncovered—but a standard-bearer, symbolic of these private people who spend their lives gladly in the service of children. This is their award as well as mine.

We live in a time of great social crisis. Our children rank at the bottom of 19 industrial nations in reading, writing and arithmetic. The world's narcotic economy is based upon our own consumption of this commodity. If we didn't buy so many powdered dreams, the business would collapse—and schools are an important sales outlet. Our teenage suicide rate is the highest in the world—and suicidal kids are rich kids for the most part, not the poor. In Manhattan, 70 per cent of all new marriages last less than five years.

Our school crisis is a reflection of this greater social crisis. We seem to have lost our identity. Children and old people are penned up and locked away from the business of the world without precedent; nobody talks to them anymore. Without children and old people mixing in daily life, a community has no future and no past; only a continuous present. In fact, the name "community" hardly applies to the way we interact with each other. We live in networks, not communities, and everyone I know is lonely because of that. In some strange way, a school is a major actor in this tragedy; just as it is a major actor in the widening gulf among social classes.

Using school as a sorting mechanism, we appear to be on the way to creating a caste system, complete with untouchables who wander through subway trains begging, and who sleep on the streets. I've noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my 25 years of teaching—that schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes any more that scientists are trained in science classes, or politicians in civics classes, or poets in English classes.

The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders. This is a great mystery to me because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools as teachers and aides and administrators, but the abstract logic of the institution overwhelms their individual contributions. Although teachers do care and do work very, very hard, the institution is psychopathic; it has no conscience. It rings a bell, and the young man in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to a different cell where he learns that man and monkeys derive from a common ancestor.

Our form of compulsory schooling is an invention of the State of Massachusetts around

A Speech by John Taylor Gatto

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1850. It was resisted—sometimes with guns—by an estimated 80 per cent of the Massachusetts population, the last outpost in Barnstable on Cape Cod not surrendering its children until the 1880s when the area was seized by militia and children marched to school under guard. Now here is a curious idea to ponder. Senator Ted Kennedy's office released a paper not too long ago claiming that, prior to compulsory education, the state literacy rate was 98 per cent, and after it, the figure never again reached above 91 per cent, where it stands in 1990. I hope that interests you.

Here is another curiosity to think about. The home-schooling movement has quietly grown to a size where one and a half million young people are being educated entirely by their own parents. Last month the education press reported the amazing news that children schooled at home seem to be five or even ten years ahead of their formally trained peers in their ability to think.

I don't think we'll get rid of the schools anytime soon—certainly not in my lifetime—but if we're going to change what's rapidly becoming a disaster of ignorance, we need to realise that the school institution 'schools' very well, but it does not 'educate'. That's inherent in the design of the thing. It's not the fault of bad teachers or too little money spent: it's just impossible for education and schooling ever to be the same thing.

Schools were designed by Horace Mann, Barnas Sears and W. R. Harper of the University of Chicago, Thorndyke of Columbia Teachers College, and others, to be instruments of the scientific management of a mass population. Schools are intended to produce, through the application of formulae, formulaic human beings whose behaviour can be predicted and controlled.

To a very great extent, schools succeed in doing this. But our

society is disintegrating, and in such a society the only successful people are self-reliant, confident and individualistic—because the community life which protects the dependent and the weak is dead. The products of schooling are, as I've said, irrelevant. Well-schooled people are irrelevant. They can sell film and razor blades, push paper and talk on telephones, or sit mindlessly before a flickering computer terminal, but as human beings they are useless—useless to others and useless to themselves.

The daily misery around us is, I think, in large measure caused by the fact that—as Paul Goodman put it 30 years ago—we force children to "grow up absurd". Any reform in schooling has to deal with its absurdities.

It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to sit in confinement with people of exactly the same age and social class. That system effectively cuts you off from the immense diversity of life and the synergy of variety. It cuts you off from your own past and future, sealing you in a continuous present much the same way television does.

It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to listen to a stranger reading poetry when you want to learn to construct buildings, or to sit with a stranger discussing the construction of buildings when you want to read poetry.

It is absurd and anti-life to move from cell to cell at the sound of a gong for every day of your youth in an institution that allows you no privacy

and even follows you into the sanctuary of your home demanding that you do its "homework".

"How will they learn to read?" you ask, and my answer is, "Remember the lessons of Massachusetts!" When children are given whole lives, instead of age-graded ones in cellblocks, they learn to read, write and do arithmetic with ease if those things make sense in the life that unfolds around them.

But keep in mind that in the United States almost nobody who reads, writes or does arithmetic gets much respect. We are a land of talkers; we pay talkers the most and admire talkers the most, so our children talk constantly, following the public models of television and schoolteachers. It is very difficult to teach the 'basics' any more because they really aren't basic to the society we've made.

Two institutions at present control our children's lives: television and schooling, in that order. Both of these reduce the real world of wisdom, fortitude, temperance and justice to a never-ending, non-stop abstraction.

In centuries past, the time of a child and adolescent would be occupied in real work, real charity, real adventures and the real search for mentors who might teach what one really wanted to learn. A great deal of time was spent in community pursuits, practising affection, meeting and studying every level of the community, learning how to make a home, and dozens of other tasks necessary to becoming a whole man or woman.

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When John Gatto's seventh-grade class threw bottles with notes into the waters off Coney Island, Wilma Amaro's bottle washed up on a New Jersey beach where it was picked up by the police chief. That led to a lunch invitation from the chief to Wilma and her mother, lessons about how pollution happens, and happy apologies from the students and the school.

New York Post photo by Robert Kalfus, 1990 ©NYP Holdings, Inc.

But here is the calculus of time the children I teach must deal with. Out of the 168 hours in each week, my children must sleep 56. That leaves them 112 hours a week out of which to fashion a self. My children watch 55 hours of television a week, according to recent reports. That leaves them 57 hours a week in which to grow up.

My children attend school 30 hours a week, use about eight hours getting ready, going and coming home, and spend an average of seven hours a week in homework—a total of 45 hours. During that time they are under constant surveillance, have no private time or private space, and are disciplined if they try to assert individuality in the use of time or space. That leaves 12 hours a week out of which to create a unique consciousness. Of course, my kids eat, too, and that takes some time—not much, because we've lost the tradition of family dining. If we allot three hours a week to evening meals we arrive at a net amount of private time for each child of nine hours.

It's not enough. It's not enough, is it? The richer the kid, of course, the less television he watches, but the rich kid's time is just as narrowly proscribed by a broader catalogue of commercial entertainments and his inevitable assignment to a series of private lessons in areas seldom of his choice.

And these things are, oddly enough, just a more cosmetic way to create dependent human beings, unable to fill their own hours, unable to initiate lines of meaning to give substance and pleasure to their existence. It's a national disease, this dependency and aimlessness, and I think schooling and television and lessons—the entire Chatauqua idea—have a lot to do with it.

Think of the things that are killing us as a nation: drugs, brainless competition, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling, alcohol, and the worst pornography of all: lives devoted to buying things—accumulation as a philosophy. All are addictions of dependent personalities and that is what our brand of schooling must inevitably produce.

I want to tell you what the effect is on children of taking all their time—time they need to grow up—and forcing them to spend it on abstractions. No reform that doesn't attack these specific pathologies will be anything more than a façade.

1. The children I teach are indifferent to the adult world. This defies the experience of thousands of years. A close study of what big people were up to was always the most exciting occupation of youth, but nobody wants to grow up these days—and who can blame them? Toys are us.

2. The children I teach have almost no curiosity, and what little they do have is transitory. They cannot concentrate for very long, even on things they choose to do. Can you see a connection between the bells ringing again and again to change classes, and this phenomenon of evanescent attention?

3. The children I teach have a poor sense of the future, of how tomorrow is inextricably linked to today. They live in a continuous present: the exact moment they are in is the boundary of their consciousness.

4. The children I teach are ahistorical; they have no sense of how the past has predestined their own present, limiting their choices, shaping their values and lives.

5. The children I teach are cruel to each other: they lack com-

passion for misfortune, they laugh at weakness, they have contempt for people whose need for help shows too plainly.

6. The children I teach are uneasy with intimacy or candour. They cannot deal with genuine intimacy because of a lifelong habit of preserving a secret self inside an outer personality made up of artificial bits and pieces of behaviour borrowed from television or acquired to manipulate teachers. Because they are not who they represent themselves to be, the disguise wears thin in the presence of intimacy, so intimate relationships have to be avoided.

7. The children I teach are materialistic, following the lead of schoolteachers who materialistically 'grade' everything, and television mentors who offer everything in the world for sale.

8. The children I teach are dependent, passive and timid in the presence of new challenges. This timidity is frequently masked by surface bravado or by anger or aggressiveness, but underneath is a vacuum without fortitude.

I could name a few other conditions that school reform will have to tackle if our national decline is to be arrested, but by now you will have grasped my thesis, whether you agree with it or not. Either schools or television or both have caused these pathologies. It's a simple matter of arithmetic. Between schooling and television, all the time children have is eaten up. That's what has destroyed the American family: it no longer is a factor in the education of its own children.

What can be done? First, we need a ferocious national debate that doesn't quit, day after day, year after year—the kind of con-

tinuous emphasis that journalism finds boring. We need to scream and argue about this school thing until it is fixed or broken beyond repair, one or the other. If we can fix it, fine; if we cannot, then the success of home schooling shows a different road that has great promise. Pouring the money back into family education might kill two birds with one stone, repairing families as it repairs children.

Genuine reform is possible but it shouldn't cost anything. We need to rethink the fundamental premises of

schooling and decide what it is we want all children to learn and why. For 140 years this nation has tried to impose objectives from a lofty command centre made up of 'experts'—a central elite of social engineers. It hasn't worked. It won't work. It is a gross betrayal of the democratic promise that once made this nation a noble experiment.

The Russian attempt to control Eastern Europe has exploded before our eyes. Our own attempt to impose the same sort of social orthodoxy, using the schools as an instrument, is also coming apart at the seams, albeit more slowly and painfully. It doesn't work because its fundamental premises are mechanical, anti-human and hostile to family life. Lives can be controlled by machine education, but they will always fight back with weapons of social pathology: drugs, violence, self-destruction, indifference, and the symptoms I see in the children I teach.

It's high time we looked backward to regain an educational philosophy that works. One I like particularly well has been a favourite of the ruling classes of Europe for thousands of years. I think it works just as well for poor children as for rich ones. I use as much of it as I can manage in my own teaching—as

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much, that is, as I can get away with, given the present institution of compulsory schooling.

At the core of this elite system of education is the belief that self-knowledge is the only basis of true knowledge. Everywhere in this system, at every age, you will find arrangements that place the child alone in an unguided setting with a problem to solve. Sometimes the problem is fraught with great risks, such as the problem of galloping a horse or making it jump, but that, of course, is a problem successfully solved by thousands of elite children before the age of ten. Can you imagine anyone who had mastered such a challenge ever lacking confidence in his ability to do anything? Sometimes the problem is that of mastering solitude, as Thoreau did at Walden Pond, or Einstein did in the Swiss customs house.

One of my former students, Roland Legiardi-Laura, though both his parents were dead and he had no inheritance, took a bicycle across the United States, alone, when he was hardly out of boyhood. Is it any wonder that in manhood he made a film about Nicaragua, although he had no money and no prior experience with filmmaking, and that it was an international award-winner—even though his regular work was as a carpenter?

Right now we are taking from our children the time they need to develop self-knowledge. That has to stop. We have to invent school experiences that give a lot of that time back. We need to trust children from a very early age with independent study, perhaps arranged in school, but which takes place away from the institutional setting. We need to invent a curriculum where each kid has a chance to develop uniqueness and self-reliance.

A short time ago, I got \$70 and sent a twelve-year-old girl with her non-English-speaking mother on a bus down the New Jersey coast. She took the police chief of Sea Bright to lunch and apologised for polluting his beach with a discarded Gatorade bottle. In exchange for this public apology, I had arranged for the girl to have a one-day apprenticeship in small-town police procedures. A few days later, two more of my twelve-year-old kids travelled alone from Harlem to West 31st Street, where they began an apprenticeship with a newspaper editor. Next week, three of my kids will find themselves in the middle of the Jersey swamps at six in the morning, studying the mind of a trucking company president as he despatches eighteen-wheelers to Dallas, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Are these 'special' children in a 'special' program? They're just nice kids from central Harlem, bright and alert but so badly schooled when they came to me that most of them couldn't add or subtract with any fluency. And not a single one knew the population of New York City, or how far it is from New York to California.

Does that worry me? Of course. But I am confident that as they gain self-knowledge they'll also become self-teachers, and only self-teaching has any lasting value.

We've got to give the kids independent time right away because that is the key to self-knowledge, and we must reinvolve them

with the real world as fast as possible so that the independent time can be spent on something other than more abstractions. This is an emergency. It requires drastic action to correct. Our children are dying like flies in our schools. Good schooling or bad schooling, it's all the same: irrelevant.

What else does a restructured school system need? It needs to stop being a parasite on the working community. I think we need to make community service a required part of schooling. It is the quickest way to give young children real responsibility.

For five years I ran a guerrilla school program where I had every kid, rich and poor, smart and dippy, give 320 hours a year of hard community service. Dozens of those kids came back to me years later and told me that this one experience changed their

lives, taught them to see in new ways, to rethink goals and values. It happened when they were thirteen, in my Lab School program—only made possible because my rich school district was in chaos. When 'stability' returned, the Lab closed. It was too successful, at too small a cost, to be allowed to continue. We made the expensive, elite programs look bad.

There is no shortage of real problems in this city. Kids can be asked to help solve them in exchange for the respect and attention of the adult world. Good for kids, good for the rest of us.

Independent study, community service, adventures in experience, large doses of privacy and solitude, a thousand different apprenticeships—these are all powerful, cheap and effective ways to start a real reform of schooling. But no large-scale reform is ever going to repair our damaged children and our damaged society until we force the idea of 'school' open—to include family as the main engine of education.

The Swedes realised this in 1976 when they effectively abandoned the system of adopting unwanted children and instead spent national time and treasure on rein-

forcing the original family so that children born to Swedes were wanted. They reduced the number of unwanted Swedish children from 6,000 in 1976 to 15 in 1986. So it can be done. The Swedes just got tired of paying for the social wreckage caused by unwanted children, so they did something about it. We can, too.

Family is the main engine of education. If we use schooling to break children away from parents—and make no mistake, that has been the central function of schools since John Cotton announced it as the purpose of the Bay Colony schools in 1650, and Horace Mann announced it as the purpose of Massachusetts schools in 1850—we're going to continue to have the horror show we have right now.

The curriculum of family is at the heart of any good life. We've gotten away from that curriculum; it's time to return to it. The way to sanity in education is for our schools to take the lead in releasing the stranglehold of institutions on family life; to pro-

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mote, during school time, confluences of parent and child that will strengthen family bonds. That was my real purpose in sending the girl and her mother down the Jersey coast to meet the police chief.

I have many ideas to make a family curriculum, and my guess is that a lot of you will have many ideas, too, once you begin to think about it. Our greatest problem in getting the kind of grassroots thinking going that could reform schooling is that we have large, vested interests profiting from schooling just exactly as it is, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

We have to demand that new voices and new ideas get a hearing—my ideas and yours. We've all had a bellyful of authorised voices on television and in the press. A decade-long, free-for-all debate is called for now—not any more 'expert' opinions. Experts in education have never been right; their 'solutions' are expensive, self-serving, and always involve further centralisation. Enough!

Time for a return to democracy, individuality and family.

I've said my piece. Thank you.

Editor's Note: *We asked Mr Gatto if he'd write a few words on what had transpired since he delivered the above speech. He wrote the following in reply. We should note that, when he'd decided to stop teaching in the school system, he had no idea exactly how he was going to generate an income.* — J. W., *HOPE Magazine*

Dear Jon,

A year and a half after I gave that speech, I quit teaching (on the Op-Ed page of the *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 1991). A week later, I was asked to speak to the engineers at NASA-Goddard Space Center, and a week after that I was at the White House. Then in rapid order I was invited to open the full season at the Nashville Center for the Arts, be the Keynote speaker for the Colorado Librarians Convention, and spend eight private hours with the comptrollers of the 32 operating divisions of United Technologies Corp. in Hartford, CT. From there to The Farm commune in central Tennessee, an Indian reservation in New Mexico, and a Christian home-school convention in Atlanta.

All in all, since I quit teaching five years ago, I've given 522 talks and workshops in 49 states (missed Oklahoma) and six for-

eign countries. I don't advertise, but I go anywhere I'm invited as long as my hosts don't tell me what I have to say.

Being in an airplane seat about one day in every two has added 85 pounds, so I expect to translate to the spirit world momentarily if I don't come up with a strategy, but in the meantime I've met an amazing cross-section of fine and courageous ordinary people from every point on the political/social spectrum—enough to convince me an American renaissance is latent in the common folk of this country if we can figure out a way to restore the democratic promise.

I think we will. I have faith, as well as hope, that we can do it.

— John Taylor Gatto

About the Author:

John Taylor Gatto, a New York City public school teacher for 30 years, was named NYC Teacher of the Year in 1989, 1990 and 1991, and NY state Teacher of the Year in 1990 and 1991. He is the author of *Dumbing Us Down*, *The Exhausted School*, and *The Empty Child: A Schoolteacher's Intuition about the Problem of Modern Schooling* (due out in early 1998 from Simon & Schuster).